

CHARLESTON TIMES-COURIER (SC)
12 March 1984

Ex-spy targets 'Company' abuses

By DAN HAGEN
Staff Writer

24E

CHARLESTON — Ralph McGehee spent 5 years spying for the CIA before he decided to defect — to the Americans.

The 55-year-old secret agent-turned-author will speak at 8 p.m. Tuesday in the Grand ballroom of the Eastern Illinois University Union, telling the story of his gradual disillusionment with the Central Intelligence Agency and his First Amendment fight against censorship attempts by the ymasters. With help from the American Civil Liberties Union and the Washington Post, he eventually forced the CIA to permit publication of his book, *Deadly Deceits*, which is available from Sheridan Square Publications in New York City.

McGehee's theme is that the CIA, at its core, tailors its intelligence to suit a confidential policy rather than gathering accurate information upon which a realistic national policy could be based. He claims this tendency has led to some of the worst foreign policy disasters in U.S. history — most notably the Vietnam war.

“Anyone has a right to be paranoid, it's McGehee. In a telephone interview Friday, the ex-spy was surprisingly relaxed for a man who knows he's being watched — and overheard. He has good reason to believe “The Company” constantly monitors his phone conversations.

“On one occasion, I was talking to a person and the monitor jumped in and was disputing what we were saying,” McGehee said. “Then he caught himself and faded right out again. We tried to engage him further in the conversation.”

He's still under periodic surveillance, usually by apprentice spies.

“I live near the Agency, and they like to train their young officers with a semi-serious rabbit. Frequently, there will be young men sitting in a car outside my house. I'll just go get in my car, drive up next to them and sit there and look at them until they go away.”

At 30, McGehee was as gung-ho as any of those trainees. He knew the Agency was doing a job that had to be done — gathering intelligence which would ultimately protect American liberty from foreign subversion. He wouldn't tolerate criticism of the Agency, and his wife Norma often jokingly referred to him as a typical “Company man.”

He worked in Japan, Thailand, Vietnam and at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va. in a variety of capacities, among them case officer on covert operations, paramilitary specialist, liaison officer with foreign police and intelligence services and intelligence analyst.

McGehee said he usually traveled under his own name, adopting various cover

stories about his occupation. That proved to be a problem when he considered quitting the CIA to seek a job in the private sector. He couldn't explain that he'd been working as a secret agent, but his cover stories were contradictory and transparent to potential employers. Obviously, he must be some kind of fishy — and undesirable — character.

His faith in the CIA began to unravel in 1967, during his second tour of duty in Thailand. He was assigned to ferret out communist agents in the northeastern part of the country. “I began to get intelligence that indicated that the Communist Party in Thailand had hundreds of people in lowland villages who had joined them. And the Agency's intelligence at the time was saying that there were only 2,000-4,000 communists in the entire country.

“But I began to see there were that many in one province alone, and I was getting confessions from these people of their communist aliases, this and that — just hundreds of confessions.”

Initially, his work won him praise from the U.S. intelligence community, he said. “Then all of a sudden I was told to go home, to shut down. The Agency's intelligence went right back to saying that there were only 2,000-4,000 communists in the country.

“For the next 10 years, I fought this. I began to see that if we had admitted in Thailand that there was a mass-base communist movement, then we would have had to admit the same for Vietnam.”

McGehee outlines parallels between the Vietnam experience and the current U.S. involvement in Central America. Another theme of his speech at EIU will be that ‘disinformation’ is a large part of the CIA's covert function, and the American people are the primary target audience for its lies.

When asked how far the CIA will go in its covert operations in the U.S., McGehee points out how far the Agency has already gone. “In the American media, the Agency has had about 400 people — all the way from full-time agents to cooperative sources. The Agency owned at least two or three press services, releasing their propaganda directly to unsuspecting newspapers. They had penetrations in UPI, AP and Reuters, the

British press service.”

“In a 10-year period, they sponsored 1,250 books,” he said. These ranged from academic studies of foreign affairs to the autobiographies of defectors. “Any time a defector comes over and within a couple of months has a book on the market, I cast a high eyebrow at that.”

The Agency's fictions have extended literally into fiction, he added. “E. Howard Hunt wrote about 40 spy novels while working for the Agency, with the encouragement of the CIA,” McGehee said. “(Former CIA Director Richard) Helms particularly hated John Le Carre's *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold*. He thought it destroyed all the illusions he was trying to develop concerning the spy trade.”

“At one time, they were breaking and entering foreign embassies. They had Jack Anderson under 16-man surveillance. They scanned 28 million pieces of mail illegally. During the Nixon era, they had what they called Operation Chaos which was directed at American people — such people as Robert Kennedy and Bella Abzug.”

But the CIA's abuses aren't merely history, McGehee believes. President Reagan's increased latitude for the CIA — inside and outside the U.S. — is a danger sign, he said.

“Obviously, we need the best intelligence service possible. We're the strongest country in the world, and potentially the most dangerous to humanity, and you've got to have good intelligence. What you have are a bunch of action-oriented, very biased individuals who do not provide intelligence. My particular kick was Vietnam. For the entire 21 to 25 years we were in Vietnam, the Agency's intelligence was nothing but creating an illusion to support what the presidents wanted to do.”

Often, he said, the CIA accepts intelligence uncritically from foreign espionage services. “Naturally, when you get your information about the Shah from SAVAK (the Shah's Iranian spy network), you don't get any criticism or you don't get any real in-depth look at the opposition. That happens all over the world.”

The friendly relationship between intelligence agencies sometimes even includes the CIA and the KGB — at least on the field agent level, he indicated. “When I was overseas one time, the KGB agent and the CIA agent were playing squash — each one trying to recruit the other. It tends to be a game. You choose up sides and play, and nobody else knows about it.”